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It's tough to prevent espionage when most of the people working in our embassies are foreigners

"DO YOU WANT ANY MORE SECRET DOCUMENTS PUT IN THE SAFE, MR. AMBASSADOR?" "NO, IVAN, THAT'S ALL FOR TONIGHT."

by Priscilla Witt

It was the oldest trick in the book. A female Soviet agent seduced and then recruited U.S. Marine Sergeant Clayton J. Lonetree, a guard who served at the U.S. embassy in Moscow from 1984 to 1986. In one of the worst breaches of security in recent history, Lonetree gave KGB agents extremely damaging intelligence, including names and photos of U.S. agents and floor plans of the most sensitive parts of the embassy.

Like all marines in his assignment, Lonetree, who confessed in January, had been warned about such female agents, called "swallows" in the trade. Marine guards at the embassy are barred from letting women enter their quarters and discouraged from having close contacts with the Soviets. But this swallow didn't have to hang out in some smoky Moscow clip joint for the chance to ensnare Lonetree. She only had to show up every day for work as a translator at the American embassy. Like more than 260 other Soviets, she was a paid employee of the U.S. government.

Our Moscow embassy has not employed Soviet citizens since last fall's U.S.-Soviet tit-for-tat expulsion of diplomatic staff that began with the Walker family spying affair in 1985. But everywhere else non-U.S. citizens, or foreign service nationals (FSNs), outnumber Americans: alongside the 11,000 U.S. civilians working at our other embassies are 20,000 foreign nationals and probably at least that many "contract hires" and personal servants. The ratio is especially high in the Third World, where diplomats have learned to endure their "hardship" assignments by surrounding themselves with enough natives to do everything from translate to towel them dry. In Rwanda, for example, 15 to 20 Americans work out of a compound that employs 250 foreign nationals.

Priscilla Witt is a Washington D.C. writer.

The State Department's Inman Commission Report on Embassy Security, issued two years ago in the wake of the Beirut embassy bombing, recognized that foreign nationals pose a security threat: "[I]t is a well- and long-known fact that there are security-related drawbacks to employing FSNs." Those drawbacks haven't moved the department to jettison its foreign workers, though; FSNs often occupy posts as guards, clerks, researchers, translators, secretaries, drivers, handymen, and personal assistants to diplomats. Diplomats argue they are worth the risk because locals are relatively cheap to employ, and can deal with local languages, customs, and bureaucracies more easily than Americans.

They're also pretty good at cooking and cleaning. Fact is, FSNs make possible the cushy lifestyle that the foreign service officer corps has long enjoyed. Among the recently expelled foreign nationals at the Moscow embassy, for example, were baby sitters and ballet teachers. So attached have our diplomats become to this foreign office featherbedding that, while the State

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Department insists on spending $4.4 billion to reinforce the perimeters of our embassies, very little is being done to guard against the swallows inside.

The baron's maids

The art of snooping for state secrets had been well perfected by the Congress of Vienna in 1814. As six kings, hundreds of nobles, and thousands more hangers-on flocked to the city to help create a post-Napoleonic Europe, thousands of Austrians put themselves at their government's disposal as collectors and purveyors of secrets. "That historic gathering provided unparalleled opportunities for the host government of Prince Metternich and his monarch, Emperor Francis, to employ local agents in a massive espionage operation to which many successors aspired," says Michael Mosettig, who has written about Metternich.

The Wild Bill Donovan of post-Napoleon Austria was Baron Hager, who built the largest secret service in Europe. Like any seasoned spook, he knew the key to obtaining diplomatic secrets was to infiltrate the housekeeper corps. By the time the diplomats checked into their hotels and palaces, the baron controlled all the maids and servants. While he provided the diplomats with endless amusements, the maids rummaged through their rooms in search of interesting scraps, according to Mosettig. The strategy didn't work on the British though, who, ever careful, burned their trash and hired their own maids.

The classic modern example of local-agent espionage is the Cicero case of World War II. During the war years, the neutrality of Turkey made it a hothouse of espionage and secrecy. It may not have made Hollywood, but in terms of intrigue, it was Casablanca times two. In the heat of plot and counterplot, the Allies nearly blew the cover off the secret D-Day invasion at Normandy.

A key figure in the Allied operation was the British ambassador to Turkey, Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugesson. An experienced diplomat and close friend of British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, Sir Hughe was briefed on all major Allied decisions. So, it turns out, was Eleysa Bazna, Sir Hughe's Turkish valet and guard, who doubled as a German spy.

Throughout 1943, Bazna, whose talents included being a skilled locksmith, removed and photographed key Allied documents Sir Hughe kept in his private safe. Many of the telegrams and documents Bazna, whose code name was Cicero, gave the Nazis detailed Allied plans to mount a massive invasion through France. Much to Sir Hughe's—and the Allies'—relief, the Germans felt Bazna's information was too good to be true. In fact, the only reason the Germans weren't waiting for the Allies on the beaches of Normandy was that they couldn't confirm Bazna's information through another source.

America responded to the Cicero affair by opening itself up to more snooping. Flush with Marshall Plan funds, U.S. diplomats hired thousands of native employees, many of whom, though skilled, were desperately willing to take even the most routine and tedious assignments. Which, by and large, is what they got. After gauging the market, diplomats suddenly had lots of laundry to be picked up and meals to be catered. University-educated FSN's became especially useful. The careers of FSOs depend largely on the cables each sends back to Washington. Using educated foreign nationals to do the grunt work—translating local government documents, chasing down this or that statistic—foreign service officers could impress the home office with ever more elaborate, if not more valuable, cables.

Over the years, the State Department has insisted that, when they're not helping diplomats impress their bosses or busy flicking feather dusters, foreign nationals serve a vital function. Most countries, the argument goes, have their own idiosyncratic systems for all the small but crucial transactions of life—mail delivery, telephone systems, car repair, shipping, internal travel—as well as for such amenities as making theater reservations or finding a good doctor or dentist. The customs surrounding these services are presumed to be beyond the ability of Americans to fathom. Bob West, director of State's Office of Foreign Service Nationals, echoes the opinion of the vast majority of FSOs: "Without foreign nationals in most places, we could just pack it in." Yet it's not as if we limit our use of foreign nationals to the most desolate and difficult parts of the world. At the U.S. embassy in London, for instance, 284 Americans somehow need 364 FSNs to help them deal with the exotic mysteries of British culture.

Another explanation for hiring foreign nationals is that they are necessary because of the "generalist" policy that governs foreign service postings. Under this system, officers are transferred every two or four years, often to completely different parts of the world. Part of the motive behind this policy is sound: to combat clientitis, the dangerous tendency of foreign service officers

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to identify more closely with the client state's interests than with the United States'. Yet the result is that our diplomats are often embarrassingly unfamiliar with the language, history, and culture of the region to which they are assigned. Only one in ten foreign service officers stationed in Iran in 1978, for instance, was even minimally competent in Farsi, the country's principle language. Which means, according to Andrew Steigman, assistant dean of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, that FSNs "provide continuity for the embassy...they are the institutional memory of the place."

There's no doubt that foreign nationals greatly help diplomats, especially in countries with bureaucracies like Russia's. Yet other countries seem to get along fine with a lot fewer than we do. The Japanese, for example, employ an average of one foreign national per Japanese diplomat—less than half the American ratio—while West Germany gets by with only one for every three Germans. Britain and France have a similarly modest number of foreign nationals, and the Soviets and the Chinese manage with virtually no foreign workers at all.

Messages to the Kremlin

On a quiet night not long ago, the American embassy in a small Third World country was the scene of an armed attack. A small squad of commandos climbed the wall surrounding the building and, knowing the electronic guard system, made their way undetected to the building's roof. There, after a few moments, they located hatches, unlocked by someone in advance, and entered the top floor. Easily disarming the warning system, the men entered the section of the embassy where political and intelligence activities are carried out.

The incident was not reported in any newspapers or State Department cables because the "commandos" were neither terrorists bent on planting bombs nor enemy intelligence agents stealing secrets and placing bugs. They were Americans, members of a crisis management team testing the embassy's security. But the team cracked the building's defense using information and assistance that could have been provided by FSN accomplices. A consultant to the team, experienced in crisis management, says, referring to the presence of FSNs, "It was like locking the front door and leaving the back door open."

This is nothing most U.S. diplomats don't already know. Particularly in communist and other authoritarian countries, it's almost a given that they're being spied on by their local workers. Foreign national spies are just another form of surveillance, like bugged walls and tapped phones, which westerners living in such countries learn to assume are always present. But that, according to diplomats, is the beauty of the system. They can get their shirts starched and at the same time keep an eye on the spies. Retiring ambassador to the U.S.S.R., Arthur Hartman, once joked that knowing his chauffeur was a KGB agent made it easy to send messages to the Kremlin.

Diplomats adopt intricate precautionary measures to guard against spying. Daniel Southerland, Beijing correspondent for *The Washington Post*, describes one such routine at the U.S. embassy there: "The diplomat removed the ribbon from his typewriter, stepped over to his office safe and placed the ribbon inside for the night.... Had the diplomat forgotten to secure the ribbon for the night, an embassy guard would have been there later to tape a pink slip on his desk to remind him of his error. Higher officials concerned with such matters would have followed that up with a harsh reprimand."

One problem with routines like these, of course, is that FSN spies, watching them carried out day after day, can figure out ways around them. In 1985, for instance, a congressional study of security at the U.S. embassy in Moscow turned up something no one expected: bugs inside typewriters in the building's most sensitive areas. These bugs would record and transmit whatever was typed. Moreover, they required frequent battery changes, which pointed to someone who had repeated access to the typewriters.

The State Department insists its thousands of FSN clerks, secretaries, receptionists, and researchers are kept far away from sensitive files and memos. But in the commotion of office life such segregation is hard to accomplish. This is especially true in peaceful, out-of-the-way posts

where routines are informal—but through which sensitive information passes that may be crucial to security in hotter spots of the world.

New precautions are being taken. The vast building program now underway on American compounds includes creating separate work areas for intelligence and FSN-related functions. But such strict working arrangements are not flawless; they have been in effect at the embassy in Moscow for years, for instance, but that didn't prevent Sergeant Lonetree's libido from luring him into spilling secrets.

If anything, the possibility that classified information might be pilfered by foreign nationals has increased as organizations like the Defense Department and the CIA have moved their intelligence-gathering operations from low-profile field offices to fancy suites inside U.S. embassies.

Having foreign nationals around, even in the most menial jobs in unrestricted areas can blow an agent's cover. According to Moorehead Kennedy, former hostage and number two man at the Iranian embassy, a keen FSN/spy in the payroll office can notice that, month after month, the salary of a certain FSO doesn't include the standard insurance deduction, a dead giveaway the officer is with the CIA.

In his book, *Ayatollah in the Cathedral*, Kennedy relates one of those narrowly averted screw-ups that makes one wonder how often similar ones aren't caught. Shortly before the embassy was taken over, a new CIA officer was added to the staff and assigned to the economics section. "Somewhat concerned," he writes, "I went to the CIA station chief to discuss what this newcomer's specific duties would be. Most of the economics staff, I pointed out, were locally recruited Iranian citizens of long tenure and experience who would be quick to spot anyone without a credible economic/commercial portfolio. Moreover, we had to assume that our local staff was under pressure to report to the revolutionary authorities. This difficulty had not occurred to the station chief."

Low-level information can also be invaluable to terrorists. Since the mid-sixties, 70 American diplomats have been killed and hundreds injured in terrorist attacks. It's impossible to say how many of these attacks utilized information provided by agents inside embassies. But many of the diplomats victimized by terrorists were attacked on routes that must have been known to FSNs in advance.

Foreign nationals have also been suspected of taking more direct roles in terrorist incidents. In 1976, for instance, U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Francis Meloy Jr. was abducted from his car, which had inexplicably crossed the border into Moslem West Beirut, and shot. About the assassination, an ex-FSO who was a friend of the ambassador's, says, "We always thought the driver had something to do with it. If anyone knows your route and your habits, it's your local."

Trojan horse of snoops

While locals can be a source of intuitive, genuine information about a country, our extensive use of them encourages U.S. diplomats to forgo learning the language or customs of the country to which they are assigned. More often than genuine disinformation, this diplomatic handicap results in benign, but equally harmful, forms of misinformation. In many cultures, particularly in Asia and Africa, it is essential politeness to tell the listener what he or she wants to hear. And of course, in all cultures it is simple wisdom to echo the opinions of a high American official, who has power over the employee.

When all other excuses fail, the foreign service establishment rationalizes its use of FSNs by hiding behind the bottom line. Foreign service nationals, it argues, are more cost-effective than American workers in similar jobs. Replacing the average FSN—whose salary is between $5,000 and $20,000—with an American, costs anywhere from $100,000 to $140,000. State Department officials point out that in some countries where unemployment, underemployment, and inflation are high—such as Egypt and Israel—the U.S. can hire an engineer or agronomist with a PhD for less than $20,000. An American equivalent, including transportation, housing, and training, would cost at least five times as much.

Some logic. The State Department is spending $4.4 billion to keep spies and terrorists out of U.S. diplomatic compounds, but because it "saves" money by hiring locals, it simply opens the newly fortified gates to a Trojan horse full of potential snoops. Worse, there are many new gates set to open. The department's Office of Foreign Buildings, which formerly averaged fewer than three new buildings a year, is now committed to between 30 and 40 a year. That means more construction in the next few years than in two preceding centuries of American diplomacy. While the bricks and mortar go up, the department is spending millions of dollars on increasing its force of foreign workers, a large percentage of whom are being put to work as, you guessed it, security guards. ■